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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 2873
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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2276
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 3515
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 7861
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 6210
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2600
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0948
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 000369

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SUBJECT: LUCKNOW'S SHIAS UPBEAT ON U.S., OPPOSE TERRORISM,
WORRY ABOUT IRAN

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Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Sunni and Shia Muslim leaders emphasized to Poloff during his January 14-16 visit to Lucknow that the overwhelming majority of India's Shias oppose Islamic terrorism (much of which has been directed against Shias) and want India to cultivate close relations with the US. Leaders of India's 20 million Shias are working actively to spread their message of moderation outside traditional Shia enclaves in Lucknow and Hyderabad by sponsoring seminars around the country in which clerics condemn terrorism as "anti-Islamic."

Shias are also recruiting Sunnis into what they hope will become a pan-Muslim movement. Our Lucknow interlocutors reported a dramatic shift in Shia loyalty from Iran to Iraq, as the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and the Shia clerics based there have regained the pre-eminent status they held before the Saddam years. Angered and worried about this trend, the government of Iran is purportedly supporting agents of influence to undercut these efforts. Although Iranian entreaties to "oppose the enemies of Islam" (the US and Israel) have largely fallen on deaf ears, all our interlocutors agreed that recent tension surrounding the Iranian nuclear program could revive anti-American sentiment among Indian Muslims. Several stated that a military attack on Iran by the US or Israel would be a major setback for

moderation, as it would spark universal Muslim outrage and convince moderate Muslims to support anti-American demonstrations and statements. Sentiments such as these help explain why Iran is such a tricky foreign and domestic issue for the GOI. End Summary.

Shias Oppose Terrorism

¶2. (C) Prominent Shia community leader and Congress politician Ammar Rizvi confirmed to Poloff that the All India Shia Personal Law Board's one-day anti-terrorism conference held in Lucknow on January 15 was only the first of many such events. Moharram, the most important Shia event of the religious year, begins on February 1. Before that, the AISPLB intends to hold similar meetings throughout India, starting with Hyderabad, home to another large Shia community. Rizvi also confirmed that his "All India Minority Forum for Democracy," will have a similar anti-terrorism conference in New Delhi and plans to invite the US Ambassador, Ambassadors from friendly Muslim countries (Iran will be excluded), and several retired Foreign Secretaries.

Attitudes Are Shifting

¶3. (C) According to Rizvi, the conferences are public expressions of an attitudinal shift in the Indian Muslim community that started with the Shias, but has begun to incorporate Sunnis as well. The object is to disassociate Islam from terrorism by branding those who use Islam to justify inhumane acts as "non-Muslims." Leading Maulvis hope to use the Qu'ran to define strictly the permissible use of war and violence within Islam as purely defensive and reinforce the explicit Islamic injunction against harming

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non-combatants and innocents. Rizvi hoped that the South Asian conferences will lay the groundwork for an international conference against terrorism to be held in a Middle Eastern country later in the year.

A Dig at Pakistani Terrorism

¶4. (C) On January 6 the All India Shia Husaini Fund (AISHF) held a similar meeting in Lucknow attended by prominent Shia Maulvis. The meeting condemned the killing of Shias by terrorists around the world, especially in "Pakistan Occupied Kashmir - Gilgit and Baluchistan," where the AISHF alleged that the Pakistani army is carrying out an anti-Shia pogrom. The meeting condemned Al-Qaeeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Toiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Hizbul Mujahideen by name for "blemishing the name of Islam."

Lucknow Conference is Well-Received

¶5. (C) At the January 15 conference titled "Terrorism: Definition and Solution," Poloff witnessed AISPLB head Maulana Mirza Mohammad Athar give a rousing and well-received kick-off speech. Athar emphasized that Shias remain the principal victims of terrorism around the world. He differentiated between "real" and "fake" madrassas, noting that legitimate madrassas stress good upbringing and education, while the others (mostly funded by Sunni Arab money from abroad), promise "heaven" in return for terrorist acts. Athar urged Muslims to cooperate with security forces against madrassas advocating terrorism. Sufi leader Dargah Khwaja Hazrat Nizamuddin condemned "jihadis" for misusing jihad to expand their political influence and "emotionally blackmailing" Muslims into committing suicide. Hindu and Sikh leaders also emphasized the essential unity of religions and the need for tolerance.

A Call to Action

16. (U) At the conclusion of the conference, the participants resolved to:

--call on those who believe in pluralism to condemn terrorism of all kinds.

--call on religious, social, and political leaders to unequivocally condemn terrorism and work together to combat it.

--call on Muslim religious leaders to educate Muslims on terrorism and expose those who support terrorism under the cover of religion.

--call on all political parties of the world to overcome petty political conflicts and unite with the mainstream majority to combat terrorism.

--call on all countries to reorient their priorities to make

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containing terrorism a top concern.

But Tehran Keeps the Pot Boiling

17. (C) In a January 15 meeting with Poloff, AISHF General Secretary Syed Hasan Mehide claimed that while the

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overwhelming majority of Indian Shias virulently oppose "Islamic" terrorists, the Iranian government uses money and agents of influence to fish in troubled waters. He maintained that the Iranian Embassy pays its principal agent, Shia cleric Kalbe Jawad, 175,000 rupees (approximately 4,000 usd) per month. Most recently, Jawad accused the US Embassy of founding and funding the moderate Shia AISPLB, and his comments were widely reported in the Urdu press. Mehide asserted that the Iranian Embassy spent over 10 million rupees (approximately 225,000 usd) to fund anti-American demonstrations over the past few months, and alleged that Sunni politician and UP Cabinet member Azim Khan is also very close to Tehran. According to Mehide, Khan routinely urges UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav to issue anti-American statements.

Even as it Loses Influence to Najaf

18. (C) Mehide explained that the revival of Shia Islam in its traditional centers in Najaf and Karbala in Iraq has deflated the religious significance of the Iranian seminary in Qom and undercut the status of the Iranian Ayatollahs. Most Shias consider the Najaf-based Ayatollah Sistani as far superior in rank to any Ayatollah in Iran. This shift away from Iran has been most prominent in India, causing concerns in Tehran that other Shias around the world may take their cue from Indian Shias. Iran is thus supporting Jawad and his followers to form a nexus with Sunni extremists (Deobandis) to oppose moderation and attack the US.

Iran's Nukes - The Fly in the Ointment

19. (C) Several Shia interlocutors maintained that the current nuclear crisis with Iran was a deliberate effort by Iranian hard-liners to stir up a confrontation with the US and Israel and shore up their flagging popularity among Shias inside and outside Iran. They claimed that Iran, as part of this effort, has chosen to de-emphasize its Shia identity and move closer to Wahhabi extremists in Arab countries. Iranian propaganda, purportedly disseminated by the Iranian Embassy in New Delhi, is urging Shias and Sunnis to unite against the "enemies of Islam" (the US and Israel). This is why Iran has

not protested the recent demolition of tombs in Saudi Arabia associated with the family of the Prophet Muhammad, which has outraged many Shia Muslims in India, but is condoned by Wahhabi Muslims in Saudi Arabia.

An Attack on Iran Would Boost Extremism

¶10. (C) All Muslim contacts, both Sunni and Shia, were

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adamant that Islamic extremists would welcome an armed attack on Iran by the US or Israel, as it would provide a much-needed boost to their flagging anti-American movement. Prominent Sunni leader Jafaryab Jilani confided that Maulana Jawad, the Deobandis, and other Muslim extremists would be jubilant about such an attack, as most Muslims, including the moderates now organizing against terrorism, would be obliged to support anti-American demonstrations and statements. He would not rule out violent anti-American attacks in India in the wake of any attack on Iran.

Comment - The Year of Iran

¶11. (C) Shia efforts to combat terrorism and steer Indian Islam on a more moderate path have been ongoing ever since the overthrow of the Saddam regime in Iraq revived the traditional Shia leadership surrounding Ayatollah Sistani. Momentum has now reached the point where Shias are publicly calling on Muslims to disassociate their religion from violent extremism and are reaching out to the US in hopes of establishing cordial relations. The Iranian nuclear crisis could derail these efforts, however. Indian Muslims of all stripes seem intensely focused on Iranian developments and would be highly critical of US "bullying" of Tehran, especially if it resulted in military action. The Iran imbroglio could come to monopolize Muslim attention in 2006 and cast other issues into the background. The sensitivity of the matter to India's 20 million Shias and over 125 million Sunnis explains why Iran is an internal and foreign policy matter of the greatest delicacy for the UPA government of PM Singh.

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